

The Moral Libertarian Case Against Safe Speech, Progressive Stack and No-Platforming

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Free speech has always been a cornerstone of Western society post-Enlightenment. However, several recent developments are threatening this important tradition: the promotion of safe speech, progressive stack speaking systems, and the increasing acceptance of no-platforming. As we will discuss one by one, all these practices are to be regarded as immoral and unacceptable under the Moral Libertarian worldview, where every individual must be granted Equal Moral Agency (EMA) as much as possible.

Safe Speech

Practicing safe speech, according to its proponents, means making sure that all speech is sensitive to the need to avoid psychologically harming minorities. On the surface, it looks like a noble goal. Surely, whenever I say things, I do try my best not to be hurtful to others. However, the problem is that safe speech is generally not just a matter of personal practice, based on personal conscience. It is policed by both activism and peer pressure. Those who are determined to have breached safe speech codes are punished with a variety of social consequences. Therefore, safe speech is actually a form of censorship against free speech.

Since Moral Libertarians demand that every individual must have Equal Moral Agency (EMA), we cannot accept the practice of censoring free speech, even for theoretically noble reasons. Furthermore, our insistence on this point is based in morality: that no individual is anywhere near moral perfection, and therefore no individual has the moral standing to require another individual to submit to them. It also doesn't matter if those demanding submission are in the majority: since all human beings are flawed and imperfect, even the majority's decisions are not guaranteed to always be more morally correct than the lone individual who disagrees. Therefore, the majority shutting down the speech of that lone individual can still be a potential moral wrong. In other words, the majority, made up of flawed human beings, still do not have the moral standing required to be able to shut up the lone dissenting individual. It doesn't even matter if the majority is 100% certain of their moral righteousness: when you are a flawed human being, your '100% certain' still doesn't equate to the Objective Truth.

Now, theoretical arguments are not persuasive for everyone, so let's look at an actual example. While safe speech has most often been argued in the context of preventing racist and homophobic speech, this is only the thin end of the wedge. Already, there have been attempts to use 'safe speech' to justify disallowing people to say that abortion is immoral, and I actually agree that this is the logical conclusion if you uphold the safe speech principles consistently. Therefore, the application of safe speech can (and actually should) mean that we cannot hold discussions about the

morality of abortion at all! My point is that, whether you personally think that abortion is morally acceptable or not, shutting down debate on such a controversial issue would amount to oppressive silence for both sides, and a repudiation of what has always been society's consensus on how to deal with controversial issues. Furthermore, thinking about it, many other morality debates can be shut down using similar justifications, leading to society simply putting a lid on every controversial issue. Nothing but total, oppressive silence. Therefore, the undesirability of 'safe speech' is far from only theoretical!

Progressive Stack

Progressive stack systems are speaking systems where disprivileged minorities are given first priority to speak. According to its proponents, progressive stack will give minorities more of a voice. Again, even though the intention is noble, moral libertarians simply cannot accept it. Firstly, the fact that some people are assigned a higher speaking priority already makes progressive stack completely incompatible with the notion of Equal Moral Agency. But even more importantly, progressive stack systems require regulation to work, and those 'regulating' the system will have complete moral agency over everyone else, since they control whether other people are even allowed to speak at all! Where people have been given a higher priority to speak, they will have been granted this privilege by the regulators, and will be pressured to not upset the regulators. Thus the regulators inevitably end up with a high degree of influence over many other individuals' speech. This is clearly not acceptable for somebody committed to Equal Moral Agency and a free market of ideas.

No-Platforming

Finally, the most outrageous form of speech censorship on the rise today is no-platforming. No-platforming refers to the deliberate denial of a platform to speak for one's opponents. Practitioners of no-platforming eschew the tried and true way of changing people's minds with polite and rational debate. Instead, they directly prevent their opponents from speaking up in the first place, for example by pressuring university administrations to cancel appearances, or by shouting over people as they speak. This is, without need for explanation, a flagrant violation of Equal Moral Agency. It is also the metaphorical equivalent of shutting down the marketplace (of ideas) by oppressive force, thus preventing people from 'buying' what they want.

Think about this: what gives anyone any right to no-platform another? As a fundamentally flawed human being, you don't have any more (or less) moral standing than any other human being. You simply don't have the moral standing to prevent another human being from speaking. Isn't that clear enough?